

ANOTHER LOOK AT ADVENTIST HERMENEUTICS

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Hardly a more sensitive topic for discussion exists among Seventh-day Adventists than the question of how to treat the Bible. Although this issue lies near the heart of what matters to us most deeply, there is nonetheless a clear difference of opinion among us concerning it.

Two fundamental questions are worth examining, both essential to the lifeblood of the Advent movement. First, does a Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutic exist? Second, assuming the first question is answered affirmatively, can we confirm it? Free from commitment to status quo, we remain ready to examine on a recurring basis any previously accepted premise, recognizing that our understanding is always partial if human reason is a component. While we accept that which God has revealed, when it comes to the question of our understanding of it, we must examine the merits of each case.

Does a Seventh-day Adventist Hermeneutic Exist?

In dealing with our first question, can we say a Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutic exists? Prior to 1950 there seems to have been substantial unity on the essentials, although not always yielding the same results. We could cite such exceptions as the king of the north, Armageddon, and sometimes rambling discussions on Daniel 11. There was agreement, however, on foundations, agreement that the Scriptures are

valid and authoritative; and that they contain authentic reports of God's acts both within human experience and beyond it; and that they remain the authoritative court of final appeal in matters of faith and practice.

Second, Scripture was understood quite literally unless coercive evidence suggested otherwise, evidence such as allegorical passages, literary figures of speech, prophetic symbols, typology, and obvious poetic constructions.

At the same time, Seventh-day Adventists gave continued attention to Biblical backgrounds, ancient Near Eastern history and Biblical archaeology, and Biblical languages. The study of backgrounds was intended to illuminate the Scriptures and garner evidence of their trustworthiness, not to provide arguments for reinterpretations or to conjecture new ideas of Biblical origins and teachings. Theology transcended sociology, anthropology, and critical studies, all three at that point already 150 years in the making. Adventists held a high view of Scripture, approaching it with a sense of respect at times bordering on reverence. Its meaning was enriched by the study of history.

The influence of Ellen G. White was important but not definitive. Where she made firm assertions with respect to meaning it was taken seriously, although the final meaning of the Bible was not determined by her statements. In general, this was the main frame of Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutic until around 1950.

Today this hermeneutical approach is criticized by some internal critics as naive, and to a point their observations have some validity. In many ways Adventist hermeneutics had been hammered out under the fire of non-Adventist critics. Unquestionably we reached certain conclusions which later measured consideration changed; for instance, relying on the "this generation shall not pass" (Matt 24:34) as a time marker for the second coming. Such minor abuses deserved correction and have received it; but such anecdotal problems hardly provide grounds for the disassembly of the entire hermeneuti-

cal mechanism built upon long experience. The real question is not "Were there errors?" but "Was the whole sound?"—and "Was it a help or an obstacle to the discovery of God's will?"

Today we face a much different picture. Another school of thought is developing on different premises. It maintains that the traditional Adventist hermeneutic has good features, but it insists that a major change is now in order along rather different guidelines. The proponents of the new hermeneutic demand (1) that it be designed to cope with troublesome problems, the "issues," rather than be structured to enhance our grasp of the main lines of Biblical teaching. In addition (2) it must factor in newly discovered challenges drawn from the social and natural sciences and adjust the understanding or interpretation of the Bible accordingly.

(3) The new hermeneutic must give greater weight to background cultural influences, or historical conditioning, as molding elements in the Biblical text and its theology. (4) It must recognize that the text has a developmental history and that the interpreter must accordingly select what can be accepted as firm, given the premise that influences on formulation of the text must be reconsidered at each given stage of development.

(5) It must recognize that our own contemporary biases impose meanings on the text, calling into question the idea that the reader can study an ancient document and, on that basis, find specific guidance for today. This (they say) requires a mediating interpretive level between the ancient text and contemporary application, one that abstracts from the text concepts that, upon careful consideration, may be found useful for the modern context. The mediating level involves a rational analysis that all but dismisses the possibility that a teaching might transfer directly from the ancient text to today. (6) The new hermeneutic disallows doctrine to influence the meaning of the text. Each text must be left to speak for itself without drawing from what other texts or Biblical authority figures tell us it should mean. (7) The new hermeneutic gives weight

to the alleged changing nature of revealed truth so that "present truth" needs to coincide well with modern value systems heavily indebted to Enlightenment humanism.

Unfortunately hermeneutics and theology are fad-ridden enterprises. Anyone with 30 years' experience in this field has witnessed the waxing and waning of at least five or six "theologies" and various hermeneutical systems, each acclaimed as the answer, but each quietly jettisoned to obscurity after a few years, leaving nevertheless a residual touch upon those who have abandoned it. Existentialism, God-is-dead theology, the theology of hope, and others gave way to a theology of liberation, and now a theology of stewardship (ecology) each resting on revision of the meaning of the Biblical text.

The "new hermeneutic" of the 1960s gave way to the structuralism of the 1970s. Now there are post-structuralist hermeneutics and reader-response oriented criticism, and so on.

The result is that we have among Adventists today more or less two hermeneutics, one the historical Seventh-day Adventist approach with minor modifications, the other a hermeneutic based on substantially differing foundations as we have described above. This latter involves modalities prominent in historical criticism (or the historical-critical method) but which claims to have purged its most obvious humanistic presuppositions, such as denial of the supernatural.

This dichotomy is well-illustrated by the discussion that followed the 1986 Annual Council approval of a document entitled "Methods of Bible Study." Although the bulk of the document was filled with practical suggestions especially for laypeople, three paragraphs of the preamble addressed some essentials of historical criticism.

Within two months following its approval the document was taken to task publicly at a meeting of Adventist Bible teachers, many of whom took strong exception to its rejection

of the historical-critical method, especially the sentence, "Even a modified use of this method that retains the principle of criticism which subordinates the Bible to human reason is unacceptable to Adventists." For well over an hour the preamble of the document was subjected to vigorous criticisms, although a proposed resolution of rejection was abandoned as injudicious. Several speakers charged that the members of the scholarly community had been denied a voice in formulating this document. However, correspondence from these persons on this subject was found later in the files of the Biblical Research Institute. The question was not that they had not been involved, but rather that in the end another point of view than theirs had been adopted.

The crux of the question is whether a blending of the historic Adventist approach with historical criticism is possible. Some argue that much in historical criticism is helpful in exegesis and theology. Ultimately a great deal rests on whether historical criticism is actually a system or whether it is simply a pool of isolated techniques that can be drawn upon pragmatically according to individual usefulness.

Comparison reveals that both hermeneutics have elements in common, but that there are significant differences in the way even these common elements are used. A case in point is the function of historical background studies. We may dismiss at the outset the most radical position that mythologizes all Biblical reports to the point of complete disregard for their authenticity. Those among us who practice the new hermeneutic do not defend such extremes. As noted earlier, historic Adventist hermeneutic maintains high interest in the study of backgrounds for the light they throw on the Scriptures. But these backgrounds do not determine the final meaning of the Bible.

The historical-critical method accords a decisive role to backgrounds, but there is profound difference between the usages in the two hermeneutics. The historical Adventist hermeneutic seeks to know how the background contributed

to events and teachings as the Holy Spirit transmitted divinely-given content within a local environment. In contrast the historical critic pursues how events as reported in the Bible could have arisen from the background such as we know it. This is treated as a normal historical process within a given culture. While supernatural activity is not necessarily denied in history, it is not accorded the likelihood of having shaped history in a decisive way. The approach used by historical critics may be willing to concede an existential or even mystical insight on the part of the person transmitting the report to us but it will not and cannot allow the full supernatural character of the Bible.

Although historical criticism and traditional Adventist hermeneutics do share a strong interest in background studies, how much do they really have in common? What they share is coincidental, because of the way the background functions is different. Although the historical Adventist hermeneutic performs certain functions historical criticism also performs, the aim and use to which these functions are put are so divergent that we can hardly call them shared functions. When interpreting meaning we enter immediately into areas controlled by governing presuppositions, which for the critical method are in conflict with genuine respect for the self-claims of God's Word. As a system, historical criticism is at such odds with God's self-revelation that no merger or blend of systems is possible without grave jeopardy to genuinely Biblical faith.

Can We Confirm the Historical Adventist Hermeneutic?

Two additional elements are worthy of brief attention. The first is epistemology, in essence how we know something. Inquiry here leads us into more fundamental questions yet, for it measures the building blocks of meaning, both at the personal level and that of world view. Some have labeled this field philosophical theology, a forbidding title indeed!

Momentous changes are taking place here. Thought

structures of 400 years' standing are coming apart. Contemporary thinking rests on a philosophical system based on (1) naturalism, the premise that our environment, properly studied, can yield satisfying understanding without reference to God; (2) optimism, the premise that since humans are capable of understanding, understanding leads to inevitable progress; (3) objectivism, the concept that the study of our environment must take place in a manner free from subjective opinion, governed by precise laws; and (4) materialism, in this setting meaning that all that is important lies within time and space and can be analyzed with high levels of precision, especially with mathematical tools.

Presently those scientists in touch with the universe in its extremities, with astronomical physicists and nuclear physicists in the lead, are presenting reports of a universe of such proportions that an organizing mind beyond nature must be postulated if what can be observed is to be coherent. Despite punctuating the equilibria of the evolutionary scale, biologists remain light years behind.

In addition there is an increasing sense of human corruptibility. A humanity that can conquer smallpox seems unable to contain the human greed that draws civilization ever closer to self-annihilation. Both Michael Polyani and Thomas Kuhn, neither "contaminated" with born-again Christianity, have conspired to perform a demolition of the supposed objectivity of science that demands a new examination of its foundations.

Voices from the contemporary community are calling now for the return of the supernatural to modern methodologies. These trends are accelerated with the widespread collapse of Marxist theory, which was the logical culmination of the modernist system.

Those working in Biblical hermeneutics must take note of these radical changes, for their impact on the immediate future will be profound. It is ironic that some among us, generations late in boarding the modernist bandwagon, have

stepped on board just as the contraption is beginning to disintegrate.

Ultimately a major criterion in deciding what hermeneutic should be followed lies in its fruits. Does our hermeneutic lead to a Christ-centered experience in which the Word testifies of Him? Does it produce a clearer grasp of what the Word actually says? Does it produce a clear definition of the will of God? Does it point up the abysmal lostness of humanity and the magnitude of God's rescue, as well as a grander global understanding of His sovereignty over all? Does it build a strong sense of mission and desire for unity in the church, firing up zeal for outreach to our neighbors? Does it lead to numerical and spiritual growth of the family of God and provide practical strength in meeting temptation? Does it lead to a resolve to be prepared for Jesus' early return in the clouds of heaven? Only such a hermeneutic carries the marks of being genuinely Adventist and will provide the framework for a growing understanding of God's will.